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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet offers guidelines to consider when developing educational programs for adults. Characteristics of adults which affect learning are discussed under the following headings: adult life cycle; time orientation geared toward immediacy; broad base of experience; independent self-concept; and social roles. The importance of allowing adults to assume responsibility for their learning is emphasized along with several ways in which this can be achieved. Four basic steps in the instructional design process are described: specifying objectives; identifying and arranging learning tasks; selecting techniques and devices; and developing evaluation instruments. Involvement of adults in the development of educational programs is discussed in relation to developing program objectives, content, activities, and evaluation. Nine techniques for enhancing the learning motivation of adult students are offered. A bibliography is included which cites five resources available from the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) system. (DC)

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Guidelines for Working with Adult Learners.

OVERVIEW: ERIC Fact Sheet No. 25.

by

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ERIC OVERVIEW

FACT SHEET No. 25

Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

GUIDELINES FOR WORKING WITH ADULT LEARNERS

A number of factors are focusing attention upon the need to provide education for adults:

- The increased realization that adults continue to change and grow throughout their lives and frequently seek assistance in dealing with these changes
- The increased proportion of adults in the total population due to increased longevity and declining birthrates
- The increased need for occupational training or retraining due to changing employment patterns and opportunities

This fact sheet describes guidelines to consider when developing educational programs for adults.

What Are the Special Characteristics of Adult Learners?

Adults possess characteristics that influence how they learn and that should be considered when developing instructional programs. Important adult characteristics are as follows:

- **Adult Life Cycle.** Every adult progresses through a series of life phases. In each phase of life, certain behaviors and skills—known as developmental tasks—need to be learned. Life-cycle phases influence how individuals approach learning as well as what they want or need to learn. In designing instructional programs, it is helpful to consider the developmental needs of adult learners at specific developmental stages.
- **Immediate Time Orientation.** Adult learning is motivated by the need to learn a new task or make a specific decision. Adults are primarily interested in learning knowledge and skills that will be useful in dealing with these specific needs. They want to acquire information for immediate application.
- **Broad Base of Experience.** Adults have extensive experiences that influence their ability to perceive, process, and use information. Their experiences result in knowledge that provides a foundation for gaining additional knowledge. Adults learn by relating new material to what they already know and by relating the new information to past experiences.
- **Independent Self-Concept.** By adulthood, individuals have developed an independent veiw of self and rely less on others for direction. Adult learning situations should be designed to allow adults to retain as much autonomy as possible.
- **Social Roles of Adults.** The role of learner is a secondary one for adults. Since adults must attend first to their primary roles, such as wage earner, spouse, parent, or citizen, they frequently have limited amounts of energy and time to devote to their roles as learners.

To summarize, adult learners are self-directed, rich in experience, concerned with their development, problem-focused, and seeking immediate application of learning.

How Can Adults Be Encouraged to Share Responsibility for Their Learning?

Because adults have an independent self-concept, it is important for them to assume responsibility for their learning. Otherwise, they may resist the learning situations in which they feel they have no voice. Unfortunately, many adults remember early educational experiences in which the teacher assumed responsibility for the learning activities. The challenge is to create a nonthreatening atmosphere in which adults have permission and are expected to share in the responsibility for the learning. This can be done in several ways:

- Listen to learners' concerns
- Learn the names of participants so they feel involved
- Relate the learning content to the participants' real life problems and situations
- Ask for feedback on previous lessons or sessions
- Respond to learners' feedback in a positive way
- Create opportunities for participants to reflect on proposed solutions to problems and situations

Sharing the responsibility for learning provides the opportunity for adult learners to have ownership, to participate, and to feel that the activity is related to their needs.

What Instructional Design Process Should Be Used?

Four basic steps in the instructional design process are as follows:

1. **Specify Objectives.** Instructional objectives are statements specifying desired learner behavior at the end of a learning activity. They translate broad program goals into specific learning outcomes. Writing instructional design skill that requires time as well as attention to learner needs.

2. **Identify and Arrange Learning Tasks.** Learning tasks are those activities that must be accomplished by the learner in order to achieve an instructional objective. Their function is to describe precisely the intended learning outcomes so that the appropriate instructional technique can be selected. For example, a learning task might be to apply successfully a procedure described by the instructor.

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3. **Select Techniques and Devices.** Once learning tasks have been identified and arranged in appropriate sequence, the technique and methods used to carry them out are selected. The instructor selects instructional techniques that will establish a relationship between the learner and the material to be learned.

4. **Develop Evaluation Instruments.** The final stage of instructional design is to develop a plan and instruments for evaluating learning. There are four general factors that can be evaluated:

   - Satisfaction—How well did participants like the program?
   - Learning—What knowledge and skills were learned?
   - Behavior—What behavior changes resulted from the learning activities?
   - Results—What were the tangible results of the program?

Based on evaluation results, instruction can be revised and improved.

In designing educational programs for adults, it is important to design instructional activities that are based on the learners' needs, but some professionals debate about who does the planning and how it should be done. The involvement of adults in the planning and decision making about the content and process of instruction is recommended, but educators differ in opinion about the extent and timing of this involvement. One approach involves having the instructor prepare a tentative plan prior to meeting with the learners, and later negotiating the plan with the learners both in terms of objectives to be achieved and how they are to be achieved. Institutional constraints may limit the degree to which an instructor can negotiate these items since institutions frequently have predetermined course or instructional objectives. Learners, however, can still be involved in determining learning activities. They can, for example, tell the instructor which instructional techniques they have preferred in the past.

Instructional techniques that draw upon adult experiences are particularly appropriate for use in carrying out learning objectives, for they call upon the stored knowledge and attitudes of learners and encourage them to participate in class sessions. They also help establish a relationship between the learner and new material. These methods include the following:

- Group discussion
- Role playing
- Simulation exercises
- Skill practice exercises

Adult learners can also be involved in the evaluation of activities. At the minimum, they should provide periodic feedback regarding their satisfaction and level of learning. If they have been involved in establishing objectives, they should also assist in developing evaluation procedures to measure the accomplishment of the objectives.

In conclusion, even if external constraints limit the amount of participant involvement in determining learning objectives, other means can be used to involve learners in instructional design, operation, and evaluation.

How Can Adult Learners Be Motivated?

The act of enrolling in an educational activity indicates some degree of motivation on the part of the adult learner. The instructor's role is to enhance and reinforce existing motivation. An adult's motivation for further learning can be enhanced in several ways:

- Acknowledge participant responses as attempts to learn whether they are correct or incorrect and follow them with accepting comments
- Reinforce or reward correct responses
- Provide instruction in small steps that allow for success most of the time
- Provide enough signals, i.e., verbal comments, written instructions or feedback, so that participants know where they are expected to go
- Provide immediate and specific feedback to responses
- Relate new information to knowledge that participants have gained through previous experiences
- Provide participants with some control over the length of learning sessions
- Involve participants in the selection and sequencing of subject matter
- Treat participants as individuals

Use of these techniques will provide positive conditions and consequences for adult learners.

REFERENCES

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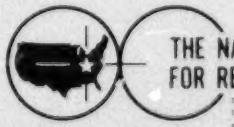

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